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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: LIVELY DEBATE ON MELES' "STATE OF THE UNION"

REF: ADDIS ABABA 4073

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi addressed Parliament December 13 on the impending prosecution of CUD opposition party members, a newly established commission set to probe the June and December violence, Ethiopia's commitment to pull military forces away from the border with Eritrea, and the temporary EPRDF administration of Addis Ababa City. Acknowledging that the government was preoccupied with bringing "CUD violent hardliners" to justice and investigating its own actions in June and December, the Prime Minister admitted little progress had been made recently on other issues, such as parliamentary, electoral, civil service, justice and budget reforms.

¶2. (U) Replying to the Prime Minister's presentation, opposition party leaders questioned Meles' report. UEDF President Dr. Beyene Petros called Meles' parliamentary reform program weak on details and criticized the lack of bipartisan cooperation. OFDM leader Bulcha Demeksa said the Prime Minister has prematurely determined who was responsible for this year's electoral-related violence, despite the fact that the inquiry commission had yet to publish its findings. All of the opposition MPs questioned Meles' intentions for permanent administration of the Addis Ababa city government. Opposition MPs contend that as the CUD won the election, it should administer the city. Meles replied that the city government had been appointed for a temporary period in the expectation that the opposition would agree to assume control of the city, since they had not done so the government must now decide what to do vis-a-vis a permanent solution. END SUMMARY.

MELES: GOVERNMENT FOCUSED ON CUD AND BORDER

¶3. (U) Meles announced that the ruling EPRDF coalition was ready to engage in dialogue with opposition parties, but singled out the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) as one party with whom dialogue was not possible because its "violent leaders" were accused of illegal activities. To those CUD members not already in detention (septel), but interested in political dialogue, Meles offered two choices: condemn the illegal activities of CUD and respect the constitution; or face legal action from the government if illegal activities continue. The Prime Minister noted that some members of the CUD had shown a desire to work outside the umbrella of their party. Meles indicated that out of the 109 CUD representatives elected for the House of People's Representatives, no less than 66 had joined the Parliament.

¶4. (U) Meles noted that many had complained that the security forces used excessive force to quell the electoral-related violence in June and November. He indicated the government had started the investigation process by establishing a "free and neutral" inquiry commission (reftel). Meles said he stands ready to implement any decision that comes out of the inquiry commission's final investigation. The Prime Minister argued that the government had successfully defended the rule of law in the face of efforts to overthrow the government.

¶5. (U) With regard to the Ethiopia-Eritrea border issue, Meles contended that the Eritrean government had taken measures to aggravate the tense situation and was "beating the war drum." The only way to avoid war, Meles concluded, was to build up Ethiopia's military force in hopes of deterring the Eritrean government from conflict. Ethiopia would, however, comply with United Nations Security Council resolution 1640 to move Ethiopia's defense forces to positions held last December. The government remained committed to resolving the border issue with hopes of sustainable peace, he said, but labeled the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission decisions "wrong."

¶6. (U) While Meles argued that residents of Addis Ababa should be governed by a party they elected (the CUD), he blamed the CUD for failing to take responsibility for administration. In the CUD's absence, Meles said that the provisional administration should remain in power, but he would devise a permanent solution with the next month.

¶7. (U) Meles acknowledged that parliamentary and electoral reform may be necessary and that the government should take

action. Accordingly, he said he had authorized Parliament to hire external professionals to compare the code of conduct and operational procedure with those of experienced democracies, such as Canada, Germany, India and Great Britain. The Prime Minister hoped to identify and correct processes and procedures that were "less democratic" and that restricted the role of the opposition. With regard to the electoral process, Meles admitted that a considerable problem of "executive capacity" existed, but said the government had taken various measures to resolve these problems. For example, the National Electoral Board (NEB) has hired foreign consultants to examine the previous election and provide capacity-building. Other reforms in the civil service, justice and budgetary spheres had made little progress because of the GOE's preoccupation with the election and related violence.

¶8. (U) According to Meles, mass media plays an irreplaceable role in building a democratic system. While he believed the state media played a constructive role during the election campaign, the opposition parties raised complaints regarding media utilization after the election. Meles said he would investigate these complaints, but argued the private media had proven to be a tool for violence and upheaval. The Prime Minister planned on establishing a legal framework and creating a strong accountability system to better isolate any illegal activities, likely to address the concern that independent press not promulgate what the Government considers hate speech.

MELES LISTENS AS OPPOSITION MAKES ITS CASE

¶9. (U) Immediately following the Prime Minister's speech, opposition party members took the floor to debate the merits of Meles' comments. Opposition members of Parliament welcomed the Prime Minister's report, but claimed it fell short on a number of fronts. United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF) President Dr. Beyene Petros argued that while the government's parliamentary reform efforts and interest in hiring international consultants sounded reasonable, Meles offered far too little information about the program. MP

Tesfaye Challa of the CUD concurred, adding that any parliamentary reform activities should include input from the opposition.

¶10. (U) Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) MP Bulcha Demeksa applauded the Prime Minister for speaking about parliamentary shortcomings, but asked for more information about the violence that had permeated Ethiopia. He stressed that the government, his own party, and the general public, had little information about those responsible for the violence of the past year. He warned about speaking "as if we know who did it" and recommended allowing the commission of inquiry (reftel) to do its work. Furthermore, Oromo National Congress (ONC) MP Gerbru Gebre-Mariam cautioned the Prime Minister about focusing the investigation on violence in Addis Ababa. There continue to be widespread problems outside of Addis Ababa and, in particular, the Oromiya region, he said.

¶11. (U) All opposition MPs speaking in response to the Prime Minister's speech questioned his decision to leave the EPRDF in control of Addis Ababa city government. ONC MP Tolosa Tesfaye believed that in this case the "people's decision has been averted." Beyene called for Meles to respect the wishes of the voting public and install those who were elected. Bulcha questioned the legality of Meles' decision to essentially appoint the current Addis Ababa city government leaders. (Note: The CUD leadership, prior to the arrest of many of its members, voted not to take over the Addis Ababa Regional Council, where the coalition had won an overwhelming majority of the seats. End Note.)

COMMENT

¶12. (U) The political discussion following Prime Minister Meles' address to Parliament highlights the divide between government and opposition parties, but also underscores the opportunity for real debate that already exists in Ethiopia's evolving Parliament. Not only were opposition party members given a public forum to express their opinions, but English-language state-run media outlets also published their

rebuttals to the PM's speech. Opposition parties have enjoyed no state media access since the election, so the appearance of opposition points of view in state media is a small, but important breakthrough.
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